THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) No irregularities were committed by Consulate General of India for hiring buildings for providing accommodation in Saudi Arabia to Indian pilgrims for Haj 2004.

(b) Does not arise.

Indo-Pak discussion on Hydro Carbon Sector

744. SHRI K. RAMA MOHANA RAO: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether India and Pakistan have discussed in the month of September, 2004 possible areas of co-operation in the hydro carbon sector;

(b) whether any discussions between the Petroleum Minister of India and the Petroleum Minister of Pakistan took place in this connection;

(c) if so, the details of the discussion and the outcome of the discussion;

(d) whether any proposal has been put forward by India in connection with exporting diesel from India; and

(e) if so, the details thereof?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMMED): (a) to (e) During their meeting in New Delhi on September 5-6, 2004 the External Affairs Minister of India and the Foreign Minister of Pakistan, recognizing the importance of availability and access to energy resources in the region around South Asia, had agreed that the Ministers of Petroleum/Gas of the two countries could meet to discuss the issue in its multifarious dimensions.

Subsequently, during their meeting in New York on September 24, 2004, Prime Minister Dr. Manmohan Singh and President Musharraf had agreed to look at the possibility of a gas pipeline *via* Pakistan to India in the larger context of expanding trade and economic relations between India and Pakistan.

In this context, the Minister of Petroleum and Natural Gas, Shri Mani Shankar Aiyar, has invited the Minister of Petroleum of Pakistan to hold further discussions on the issue, and to also explore cooperation possibilities for the export of diesel from India to Pakistan.

Invitation to President Bush

745. SHRI YASHWANT SINHA: Will the Minister of EXTERNAL AFFAIRS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the Prime Minister has invited United States President Bush to visit India; and

(b) the response of President Bush to this invitation?

THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL AFFAIRS (SHRI RAO INDERJIT SINGH): (a) Yes, during their meeting in September 21, 2004 in New York, Prime Minister extended an invitation to U.S. President Bush to visit India.

(b) President Bush's response was positive.

Increase in freight rates for tankers

746. SHRI MURLI DEORA: Will the Minister of SHIPPING, ROAD TRANSPORT AND HIGHWAYS be pleased to state:

(a) whether the increase in crude prices since September, 2004 has culminated in a jump in shipping rates;

(b) if so, the freight rates for various categories of tankers in early September and at present;

(c) whether charter rates for very large crude carriers per day have almost doubled and if so, the reasons therefor; and